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ABSTRACT

Twenty-two advertisements from "Reader's Digest" and twenty-two from "Retirement Living" magazine were analyzed in order to determine the way in which old people are portrayed. The advertisements were found to support the common societal stereotypes that old people are unproductive, prefer to associate with other old people rather than with younger people, are uninterested in sex, and are serene. In addition, the advertisements fostered the advertising stereotypes that old people have a great deal of money, have youthful appearances, are grandparents, and have living spouses. However, the advertisements were not found to support the societal stereotypes that the aged are inflexible, senile, physically deteriorated, and dependent. No great differences were found between the images in the "Reader's Digest" advertisements and those in "Retirement Living." The results of the study indicate that the rhetoric of magazine advertisements conveys incomplete and inaccurate information about the aged and does not acknowledge their individual differences. As a result, the needs, preferences, and abilities of individual old persons are ignored. (GW)

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A TARNISH ON THE GOLDEN YEARS

Vicky Bradford

University of Colorado

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Vicky Bradford

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

February 3, 1978

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One minority group in the United States steadily grows larger each year. Since the turn of the century, this group has tripled in size.[1] By the year 2000, it is expected to comprise one-quarter of America's total population.[2] More important than its statistical size, however, is the fact that membership in this group is almost unavoidable. Death provides the only possible escape. As Dr. Robert Butler explained, "We don't all grow black or Chinese, but we all do grow old."[3]

For these qualitative and quantitative reasons, the field of communication cannot ignore the elderly people in our society. However, very little has been done within this discipline to examine the communication needs, images, or problems of the aged. The studies that have been conducted are concentrated in the area of mass media. For example, two unpublished doctoral dissertations described the uses of the media for specific elderly populations.[4] Peterson was concerned about the visibility of the aged in prime time television shows.[5] Atchley and Seltzer studied the general categories of positive and negative images of old people in 20th century children's literature.[6] However, no one has examined the rhetoric of the media to determine what <u>specific</u> images are being depicted.

Bearing in mind the definition of rhetoric as any work with "suasory potential or persuasive effects,"[7] I will identify and evaluate the rhetorical images of the aged as depicted in the most persuasive of all mass media—advertising. Section I of this essay provides the foundations for this criticism. The second section advances and supports the following two arguments: (1) some though not all societal stereotypes about the aged can be found in magazine advertising and (2) additional "advertising" stereotypes have been created. In Section III, I will discuss the dangerous effects of such stereotypic images.

I

Brockriede defined rhetoric as "the study of how interpersonal relationships and attitudes are influenced within a situational context." He further specified the essence of the rhetorical impulse can be found in mass media and other institutions projecting an image.[8] According to this definition, advertising is a rhetorical act. First, it is persuasive. The literature on advertising indicated two principle schools of thought. One perspective was the essence of advertising lies "in the idea of influencing people."[9] Although critical of such power, Voelker and Voelker recognized the influential effects of magazine advertising specifically when they said it "stimulates desires for possessions."[10] Sandage and Fryberger considered advertising to be comparable to the school and church in the magnitude of its social influence.[11]

Those who held the second perspective argued advertising is most commonly used to reinforce what the consumer already knows or believes. However, they also recognized its persuasive character. White maintained, "The function of advertising is to understand, to reflect, and in most instances to accept the value-structure of society." Later in the same article he acknowledged it as an influential force when he said advertising could redefine the attitudes about a certain product on a societal or subsocietal scale.[12] Although McGarry cautioned against exaggerating the importance of advertising, he admitted, "It would be absurd to argue that [advertising] does not effect our attitudes."[13] Regardless of their perspectives, then, most writers agreed: advertising has suasory potential and some degree of persuasive effects.

In addition, advertising is a rhetorical form because it projects images. The primary image associated with advertising is that of the brand.[14] I maintain, however, there is a secondary influence. Just as the primary product or service image is created or intensified via advertising, the secondary image of the people in the ad is reinforced and/or initiated, also. For

example, Gaskell discovered certain stereotypic images of women as portrayed in advertisements in five popular, general circulation magazines.[15] Because of its persuasive and image-projecting capabilities, then, advertising is an appropriate subject for rhetorical criticism.

The rhetoric of magazine advertising is of special interest for two reasons. First, as has already been indicated, advertising in all media has an effect upon the audience. Second, magazine ads specifically have been found to be the most frequently used and helpful source of product information. Thus, the attention paid to advertisements in magazines is high.[16]

I was curious to see if differences existed between advetisements in magazines intended for any age group and those specifically intended for the elderly population. Thus, I examined the magazine that has the largest United States circulation and no special area of interest—Reader's Digest.[17] For comparison, I selected Retirement Living, the most popular of the few commerical magazines intended for an aged readership.[18] Because I was interested in contemporary images of the elderly, I randomly selected issues from the time span 1972-1977. Twenty-two advertisements from each magazine type were content analyzed using a two part form. Section I was somewhat open-ended and asked for responses concerning the physical characteristics and roles of the old people pictured in the ads as well as the social climate surrounding them. Section II contained portions of the Rosencranz-McNevin aged semantic differential selected for their applicability to printed advertising. The rhetorical images discovered in the advertisements will be identified in the next section of this paper.

II

"Stereotypes are sets of beliefs which purport to describe typical members of a category of people, objects, or ideas."[19] American society has

several such beliefs about old people. Many writers have theorized about these stereotypes;[20] many empiricists have tested for them.[21] From this wealth of literature, I have identified eight specific stereotypes commonly associated with older people.

The aged are unproductive. Individuals holding this stereotype believe old people automatically lose their ability to constructively contribute to society. For this reason, they support the policy of mandatory retirement at age 65. They contend the aged lack efficiency and creativity. The phrase "used up" is often employed to describe an unproductive old person. Thus, this stereotype is not a question of the old person choosing to be unproductive. It is a statement that he/she cannot be otherwise.

The aged prefer to disengage from society. The problem word in this stereotype is "prefer." Old people are viewed as wanting to be alone; as seeking old friends over younger ones. Thus, it becomes easy to rationalize guilt away by saying, "If an old person is lonely, it's by his/her choice."

The aged are inflexible. The image of the conservative, stubborn, critical, demanding old person is associated with this stereotype. Old people are viewed as being unable to change. They are believed to be nonprogressive and old fashioned.

The aged are senile. Old people who are considered to be senile are described as forgetful, emotionally unstable, and unable to make decisions for themselves. They are said to "live in the past" and are unable to focus their minds on the present or future.

The aged are physically deteriorated. If an individual holds this stereotype, he/she believes all old people are physically weak, perpetually ill, accident prone and uncoordinated. He/She believes old people are obsessed with their health problems and care only about their daily bodily functions.

The aged are dependent. This stereotype is associated primarily with the notion that all old people live or should live in institutions. However, there are other applications. For example, dependent old people "can't fend for themselves," and/or "require financial assistance." Worse than the stereotypic label, however, is the notion that all old people want or expect to be "taken care of."

The aged have no sex drives. In this stereotype, old people are viewed as either unable or unmotivated to perform the physical act of copulation. Males are sometimes pictured "humorously" as "dirty old men who would like to but can't." Females, however, are seldom seen as even having an interest in such basal urges.

The aged are serene. This stereotype is based on the belief that old people are unproductive, disengaged, inflexible, senile, physically deteriorating, dependent, sexually impotent, and are happy about it. In other words, they are "aging gracefully." They are supposed to tell stories to grand children, offer advice when asked for it, and otherwise quietly and happily go about the business of dying without bothering anyone too much.

The rhetorical image of old people in the magazine advertisements examined in this study reflected some of these societal stereotypes. Both the Reader's Digest and Retirement Living advertisements depicted the elderly people as being unproductive. This image was not displayed with blatent statements. It was implied by the activities in which the old people were engaged. For instance, only two of the fifty-two ads showed an old person on-the-job. One of these conducted an orchestra; the other hosted a radio talk show, hardly typical professions for any age group. In the Reader's Digest ads, old people talked (2), sang (1), stood (2), sat(4), played games (1), read(1), traveled(1) and six of them ate. The most unusual unproductive activities were picking out a turkey and opening a present. Aside from the activity of the two

employed persons, gardening(2) was the only activity described as even slightly productive.

In the Retirement Living ads, the activity focused on rest and recreation. The old people read(3), traveled(4), slept(2), played games(1), worked on a hobby(1), stood(2), rode a bike(1), played golf(3), and rode a horse. Eleven old people were depicted sitting, doing nothing. As may be expected from a retirement magazine, no one was shown on-the-job.

Another measure of the productivity stereotype was the Productive/Unproductive scale on the semantic differential. According to this measure, the Reader's Digest ads showed old people as highly unproductive(6), very unproductive(8), slightly unproductive(4). Four persons were scored as slightly productive and only two were perceived as being highly productive. The old people in Retirement Living ads were classified as highly unproductive(4), very unproductive(16), and slightly unproductive(6). One was scored slightly productive and another was declared neutral (unable to ascertain).

Since productivity refers to contributions, efficiency, and creativity; the rhetoric of these advertisements did nothing to dispel the first societal stereotype. In fact, they reinforced it. Old people, as depicted in these ads, were unproductive.

Neither group of advertisements reflected the lonely image associated with the stereotype of disengagement. The Reader's Digest ads showed old people alone only six times. They were with one other person nine times, two to three others twice, and in a family group on five occasions. Only one old person was in a crowd. The Retirement Living ads depicted the social situations as follows: alone(9), one other person(15), and two other people(4). This information does not support the notion of old people preferring to be by themselves all the time.

The Retirement Living ads, however, do support the stereotypic image of old people seeking the company of those their own age exclusively. Of the nineteen people pictured with an old person, thirteen of those were judged to be old, also. While the ads did not openly state a preference was in operation, the inference can certainly be justified. Thus, the second societal stereotype is partially illustrated in these advertisements.

The societal stereotype of the inflexible old person was not supported by the rhetorical image in the ads. One measure of their willingness to change was their clothing. Reactions to the Reader's Digest ads described sixteen of the twenty-eight old people as wearing modern clothes. In the Retirement Living ads the measure was twenty of twenty-four. As it is possible to be modernly dressed and still be inflexible, the responses on the semantic differential scale of Progressive/Old fashioned provided more acceptable evidence. The Reader's Digest ads were scored as follows: extremely progressive(2), very progressive(3), slightly progressive(7), and in nine instances such judgments could not be made. Only three old people were classified as old fashioned. The Retirement Living ads heavily favored the Progrssive end of the continuum with four old people considered highly progressive, fifteen as very progressive, and seven as slightly progressive. In both magazine types, then, the old people were considered to be flexible and progressive.

The fourth societal stereotype, senility, was not found in any of the ads. By its very nature, this stereotype would not constitute "good" advertising material. While it would be possible to show the old people receiving assistance in buying a home or an insurance policy, these images do not indicate senility. Stereotypic images of the forgetful, emotionally unstable old person were not depicted.

Surprisingly, the fifth societal stereotype was not found in the rhetoric of the ads either. With all of the medicinal products on the market, I expected

to find many ads aimed at the stereotypic image of the ailing old person. That is not what I found. In the Reader's Digest ads, twenty-three of the twenty-four old people were described as healthy; the one remaining was considered to have a minor illness. The Retirement Living ads contained twenty-two healthy old people. The other individuals were described as having minor illnesses(2), serious illnesses(2), and critical illnesses(1).

The semantic differential revealed similar results. Seventeen of the old people in the Reader's Digest ads were classified as very healthy and six were considered extremely healthy. The proportions were reversed in the Retirement Living ads with fifteen persons being scored as extremely healthy and seven as very healthy. While in the Reader's Digest advertisements the most serious health problem was slipping dentures, such illnesses as heart attacks, high blood pressure, and arthritis were portrayed in the Retirement Living ads. Since a few but certainly not all old people suffer from serious illnesses,[22] the proportions found in the Retirement Living ads more accurately reflected actual health conditions than did the ads from Reader's Digest.

Another interesting observation was that even in the advertisements promoting remedies for illnesses, the old people were shown smiling and happy. The apparent intention was to depict an individual after using the product, not before. Therefore, in the very advertisements where the grumbling, complaining stereotypic image would be expected; it did not appear.

A specific scale on the semantic differential measured the occurence of the sixth societal stereotype. Two of the old people in the Reader's Digest ads were considered extremely independent, seven were judged as very independent with five scored as slightly independent. Nine were considered neutral and one as very dependent. The Retirement Living ads leaned heavily toward an independent image, also, with nine old people described as extremely independent and fourteen as very independent. These results indicated the

stereotype of dependence was not perceived.

By the very absence of sexual overtones, the ads in both magazines supported the seventh stereotype. No old person was shown touching any other old person. The only physical contact at all was in the grandparent/grandchild relationships. Even though fourteen old people in the Retirement Living ads and nine in the Reader's Digest's were with assumed spouses, none of them were displaying any signs of intimacy or even affection. No products were advertised that could be associated with sexual stimulation, such as perfume or after shave. The rhetorical image was certainly not one of sexual interest or attraction.

Examples of the societal stereotype of serenity were found in two instances. Except for the few ads depicting an illness, all the old people in all the ads were described as being happy. The semantic differential scale Happy/Sad showed the same results. Fourteeen of the old people in the Reader's Digest ads and seventeen in the Retirement Living ads were scored as extremely happy. Very happy was the description applied to all but eight of the others. Similar results were found on the Satisfied/Dissatisfied scale. Thus, the old people were depicted as unproductive, somewhat disengaged, sexually neutered and extremely happy.

Not only did the advertising rhetoric or lack of it support several of the societal stereotypes, additional "advertising" stereotypes were discovered as well. Old people were depicted as having a great deal of money. On the semantic differential scale of Poor/Rich, a total of twenty-seven old persons were scored as being very rich and ten extremely rich. The elderly people were shown in luxurious travel trailors and nicely decorated homes. Most of them were well dressed in what appeared to be expensive clothes. The image was not one reflecting even moderate incomes.

A second advertising stereotype is "the youthful sixty-five" image. The individuals in the ads were pictured as being young old people. Thirty-three of them were described as having slightly lined skin, ten were said to be wrinkled, and only two fit the "heavily wrinkled" category. The approximate ages recorded also reflected this emphais on the youthful image. Of the total fifty-two individuals pictured, forty were judged to be in their middle to late sixties. The oldest age recorded was seventy-four.

The third and fourth advertising stereotypes emerged separately from each of the magazines. The Reader's Digest ads depicted what I have labeled the "grandparent syndrome." Closely related to the stereotype of serenity, this image portrayed old people in the role of a "grandpa" or "grandma." Of the seventeen ads containing more than one person, ten of those showed the old person with a young child or children; six others placed the old people in the parental role with adult offspring. The activities of the "grandparent syndrome" varied from telling stories to playing games; from opening gifts to selecting a turkey, In all of these instances, the old person was shown as the advice giver and/or the "second child" in the advertisement.

The fourth and final advertising stereotype was found in the Retirement Living ads. This image depicted elderly couples. Fourteen of the eighteen ads containing two or more people pictured an old person with his/her assumed spouse. Thus, the following stereotype emerged: old people have living spouses.

This rhetorical analysis has established the existence of stereotypic images in a randomly selected sample of magazine advertisements. No great differences existed between the images from the Reader's Digest ads and those from Retirement Living. The major evaluative argument of this essay centers around the harmful implications of the stereotypic images discovered in the ads from both types of magazines.

III

Stereotypes are dangerous beliefs. They are often based upon inaccurate or incomplete evidence[23] and they ignore the gradations of differences among the individual group members.[24] An examination of the aged stereotypes discovered in the advertising rhetoric illustrates these undesirable principles in operation.

The stereotype of unproductiveness is a myth about old people. As Butler indicated, "Old people tend to remain productive and actively involved in life . . . . Substantial numbers . . . become unusually creative for the first time in old age. . . . many old people continue to contribute usefully to their families and communities in a variety of ways."[25] Comfort said older workers have a 20% better absentee record than their younger counter parts. They also have fewer disabling and nondisabling injuries and fewer accidents while on the job.[26] The evidence indicates that many old people are productive, reliable workers. Yet the stereotypic image ignores this. According to it, old people are unable to contribute.

"All old people have no sex drive." This stereotype is not an accurate image either. Butler referred to evidence to counter this claim:

> In truth, sexual interest and activity are much more common in old age than is generally realized. . . . Masters and Johnson as well as others have reported that the two major requirements for enjoyable sexual activity until late in life (and this can mean the seventies, eighties, or later) are reasonably good health and an interested and interesting partner.[27]

Perry explained, "A satisfying sex life in youth and middle years is likely to continue into old age, unless medical reasons prevent it (unusual)."[28] After citing several studies, Comfort concluded, "Every study shows old people are capable of enjoying an active sex life."[29] Again, the evidence is ignored by those employing the stereotype.

The favorable stereotypes are probably the most dangerous. Based upon

incomplete evidence, they fail to recognize the gradations of differences in the older population. Thus, the problems of many old people are ignored and an unrealistically positive image is propagated. Such is the case with the societal stereotype of serentiy and the four created by the advertising media.

Visualizing old people as serene and happy sages is a convenient way for society to "get off the hook. The sage requires little except admiration."[30] This image also ignores the fact that "older persons experience more stresses than any other age group." They face depression that comes from a diminished social and personal status, grief for their own losses as well as the approaching loss of themselves, and anxiety about loneliness, illness, helplessness, and money.[31] Old people have incredible stress in their lives. To envision all of them as the happy, contented people portrayed in the advertisements shows a gross misunderstanding of their problems. This misunderstanding is based on incomplete information and a refusal or inability to recognize the gradations of differences.

The image created in the ads of extremely wealthy old people is also unrealistic. Kelly pointed out, "Old people have fewer demands on their budgets than they did when they were younger with growing families to support."[32] However, the stereotype of wealth does not accurately describe their situation at all. In fact, "According to the latest government figures, 23 percent of the elderly population is poor; 19 percent live in substandard housing."[33] While it would be just as erroneous to say that all old people are poverty stricken, visualizing them as wealthy does not acknowledge the actual situation any more directly. The plight of the 23 percent who are poor is thus totally ignored.

The "youthful sixty-five" stereotype is erroneous, also, though perhaps not as harmful as the other favorable stereotypes. By depicting the vast majority of old people as 65 to 75-year-olds, however, a large number of the

aged are ignored. According to the United States Census, approximately eight million people in America are 75 or over. These people do exist, yet the advertising stereotype ignores them.[34]

The "grandparent syndrome" does not reflect a complete picture either. The issue is not whether old people are grandparents. It is the assumption that all old people are and want to be nothing else. Such assumptions ignore the increasing educational level of the aged in American society.[35] While it is probably safe to say most grandparents enjoy spending time with their grandchildren, they also need the intellectual stimulation provided by adults of similar educational background and interests. Believing that at age 65 old people enter a second childhood and thus prefer the constant company of children is just as erroneous as believing the aged prefer to associate exclusively with other old people. As in their younger years, old people enjoy and need association with more than one age group. Butler wrote, "One study presents the theory that mutual separation of the aged person from his accustomed society is a natural part of the aging experience. <u>There is no evidence to support this generalization</u> [emphasis added]."[36]

The stereotype of the aged couple also reflects an incomplete picture. While it is true fourteen million people over age 65 do live in their primary family (husband and wife), more than six million elderly persons are living alone.[37] Through the "allness" requirement of stereotyping, the potential loneliness and unmet needs of these people are ignored.

The final danger of stereotypes applies to the advertising media specifically. Some researchers argue advertising has the power to transmit new stereotypic images to the consumer. Himmilweit, Oppenheim and Vince concluded, "Grounds exist for believing that exposure to the pictoral media does bear some direct responsibility for building up stereotyped thinking."[38] Others, such as Berelson and Steiner, maintained, "The common stereotypes of the society tend

to be copied unconsciously in the mass media [including advertising]."[39] Whether creating or intensifying stereotypic images, advertising does have an effect on the way American society envisions and thus treats its aged members. As Mead indicated, images guide a person's actions and attitudes toward the object or person visualized.[40]

American society, then, is being presented unrealistic, inaccurate pictures of old people by the rhetoric of magazine advertisements. Even though not all societal stereotypes are depicted in the ads and some realistic images of old people are displayed, the advertisements contain harmful images of the aged. By conveying incomplete and inaccurate information, these stereotypes do not acknowledge the differences that exist among the members of the elderly population. As a result, the needs, preferences, and abilities of each individual old person is ignored. Not only will pressing problems remain unsolved, but the self-image of the aged will be harmed, also. Twente wrote, "Uniqueness is what gives each aging person . . . his [or her] . . . peculiar worth."[41] And these are the dangers of the stereotypes occurring in the "most pervasive form of persuasive communication."[42]

What can the advertisers be expected to do? They can and should correct the inaccurate stereotypic images of unproductive, sexually impotent old people. They should depict the aged in creative and constructive activities. Affection between the sexes should no longer be taboo. Criticisms such as the one offered in this paper will help call attention to the needed alterations in the aged image. Given the commerical nature and purpose of advertising, probably very little change can be expected in the favorable stereotypic images. For example, a depressed, unhappy, poorly dressed old person would not "sell" the notion that "Retirement community X is a wonderful place to live." Since it is doubtful that these favorable stereotyes will be altered, American society must be made aware of them. For as Cronkhite stressed, "The defense we have against this [or any] assault on our intellects is awareness."[43]

To accomplish this task, the rhetorical image of old people as depicted in advertising must continue to be the subject of study and criticism.

The criticism presented in this paper was based on a limited study, to be sure. More extensive sampling of a larger universe would help test the findings. Searching for specific images of the aged in other media would provide additional insights. The important point is the communication discipline must become involved in the field of gerontology. The aged members of American society require and deserve such interest and attention.

ENDNOTES

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